

Nine-time Olympic gold medalist Carl Lewis tells why he's got a running start in his role as U.N. goodwill ambassador fighting hunger

Giant leap for mankind

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From athletic diets to fighting hunger. It might not seem an obvious fit, but for Carl Lewis it felt like a logical move. Upon finishing his sports career, the nine-time Olympic gold medalist who competed in track and field decided to use his fame for greater goals. In 2009, he became a so-called Goodwill Ambassador to the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations.



Carl Lewis

last Olympic gold medal in 1996, says he realized he had to take action while on a trip to India. He wondered how the locals could cope with all the poverty visible on the street.

"I was talking to the general manager of the hotel, and I said, 'You know, you drive past these people every day and they're hungry, and they're homeless, and they don't have anything,'" Lewis says. "How do you do it, and just keep driving?" And the guy said, 'Well, you get used to it.'

"That just kind of hit me. How can we get used to that? We should be doing something about that. And then it wasn't long after that, that I was approached by FAO to be an ambassador."

Lewis' experience in India made him realize that his incredibly successful athletic career could help to achieve some of that change.

"Well, people listen," said Lewis of the effect his athletic success has had on his fight against hunger. "The fame, it brings people to the party, and that's a great thing that the hard work and dedication did."

Self-sufficient

According to FAO estimates, there were

over 1 billion undernourished individuals in 2009. Although Lewis realizes that changing people's perception about how poverty affects the world would be a big step in the fight against hunger, he also acknowledges that more needs to be done, such as working to make poorer countries more self-sufficient.

"I think one of the things we need to do — and what the FAO is focusing more on — is helping people to become self-sufficient. Instead of dropping food all the time, we need to think: How can we help them grow their own food? How can we help them develop their own areas?"

"I think that's the biggest issue, and it is a huge benefit for everyone in the world if countries can become more self-sufficient. Instead of giving them food, give them feed and fertilizer. Then all of a sudden we are helping them become self-sufficient, and then we can move on to the next group, and then just check back up."

MDG Champion

Earlier this year the UN called upon Lewis to help promote the Millennium Development Goals by becoming an MDG Champion. In September, he attended a high-profile summit in New York, where even the likes of Bill and Hillary Clinton were present. While the experts discussed the progress of the MDGs in the runup to their deadline in 2015, Lewis gained an insight into the enormity of the tasks.

"I think the biggest thing is that we are marching, but we're not marching fast enough because there is still a billion people hungry," says Lewis. "But it was an honor to be a part of it. We have to make the unattainable goals attainable."

Strength to stand up

Although today Lewis is using his knowledge and influence in the fight against hunger, he has always believed in standing up for what is right. During his career, Lewis fought to make his sport professional and wasn't afraid to talk



Catching air:

Carl Lewis, of Willingboro, N.J., retired from track and field after the 1996 Atlanta Olympics.

about athletes wages, or even drugs. He says he acquired the strength to stand up for these many causes from his parents.

Lewis was born in Birmingham, Ala., in 1961. His parents were heavily involved in the Civil Rights Movement and even considered Dr. Martin Luther King a family friend.

"When I was being raised, my parents marched down the streets, and they were involved in the housing," said Lewis.

"When I came into my sport, I realized that amateur athletics was technically glorified slavery. [It was] wealthy people playing games with people, and they got all of the money. The athletes had no control because they were broke. They went where they were told to go, they did what they were told to do."

"So my idea was that, if I am an athlete and a professional basketball, baseball, or whatever player gets paid to do his job, why shouldn't we be? So therefore I really fought on that issue."

Carl Lewis Foundation

Along with his own legacy, Lewis' parents also had an effect on his future charity work. Growing up Lewis watched his parents start the track club and become involved in many aspects of the community. That influence translated into his many charitable contributions during his career, and into the Carl Lewis Foundation, which focuses on

physical education, family involvement, and the arts.

"The foundation for me was just an extension of what I believed in during my entire career," Lewis explains. "I was involved in charity work throughout my professional life and then when I retired I had more time to start my own foundation."

The aim was to help "kids who were not staying active and healthy," he said. He tries to get children back into physical exercise and at the same time involve their families to convince them of the needs for sports and a healthy lifestyle.

Veganism

Hand in hand with his charitable approach, Lewis decided to embrace veganism. At the time, he made many headlines with his seemingly controversial decision to start eating a vegan diet while being an elite athlete.

"I did it for one specific reason," he said. "As a long jumper, weight is a huge issue. You can imagine trying to carry this weight through the air. So, at the time I ate everything I wanted, but I kind of starved myself to get my weight down, and I realized that was an unhealthy diet. So when I talked to people and did some research, they advised me to go to a vegan diet."

"All of my personal bests came while I was on this diet at 30 years old. But it is a challenge to the average person."